Handling Diversity.

Medieval Europe and India in Comparison (13th-18th Centuries CE)

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1. Abstract

Research interest in forms and appearance of diversity has constantly increased in recent years. This also encompasses the interpretation of Medieval Europe, which is increasingly being considered as an epoch determined by dynamic processes of integration and disintegration. Sometimes diversity is even highlighted as one unique feature of Europe. Additionally, diversity and its outcome, such as competition and rivalry, are taken as explanations of European expansion in modern times. However, diversity was no unique feature of Europe, but a pervasive trait of other pre-modern civilizations, too. That's true particularly for the Indian subcontinent. For that reason, we will compare the patterns in how political, social and religious diversity was conceived and negotiated in Medieval India and Europe. The results of this discussion will be a new approach to the historical key question of how India and Europe accomplished the transition to Early Modernity.

2. Research Project

Research topic

The scrutiny of diversity – cultural, religious, ethnical, and political – is one of the main fields of contemporary research on European history. For the last ten years many aspects of these instances of diversity within Europe and at its frontiers have been studied by various scholars and research initiatives. Theoretical concepts such as ethnogenesis, acculturation, assimilation, entangled history, as well as trans-cultural history and others have been applied in order to develop a better framework for interpretation. As a result of this debate, the perception of medieval Europe has changed considerably; the continent is now considered as a region of heterogeneity, shaped by steady processes of integration and disintegration of peoples.

There has been a second shift in medieval Europe’s perception; from a traditional point of view,
Europe’s supposed singularity has been taken for granted. In contrast, current works are criticizing this unique status as a global exception. Several comparative studies, which put Europe in its Eurasian context, have recently been published – mainly on specific topics such as perception of the other, political and administrative institutions, the tradition of wisdom, etc. However, these varying themes have never been combined into one research program that focuses on the multifaceted ways of handling diversity. The planned project will combine the question of diversity with a comparative perspective.

In the global context, the Indian subcontinent is an ideal region for comparison due to its interior variety in cultural, religious, ethnical, and political terms. Thus, like Europe, India was not a culturally, religiously, ethnically, or politically unified entity in the period from 13th to 16th centuries CE. Constant strife led to warfare among kings, but there was no accepted means for incorporating land into one's own country. No dynasty, therefore, could achieve overall political supremacy. At best, nominal tributary rule over neighboring kings was the accomplishment of Indian rulers of the medieval period. During this epoch, Indian peoples were constantly exposed to foreign influence, permeating parts of the subcontinent, at times peacefully, at times by force. But there were geographical and cultural factors that still made India a distinct region. The entire sub-continent maintained use of an intellectual language, Sanskrit, which would seem to indicate a common culture for the entire area. The portion of the population who knew Sanskrit, however, was undoubtedly very small. While all of India certainly shared many more common characteristics, India cannot be considered one social unit during the medieval period. So both pre-modern India and Europe were characterized by the feature of variety within unity.

Both the differences and similarities between Europe and India are therefore obvious, but did the historical development in both regions follow the same path towards similar results? There are several essential questions, which have to be posed in order to tackle the issue: Was the perception, the tackling, and the result of cultural contact realized in the same way? Was handling diversity in India similar to handling diversity in Europe? Moreover, what do we learn about the two world regions by comparing the specific forms of handling diversity? Are there European or Indian patterns of dealing with heterogeneity? These questions will be discussed in the project from various vantage points. An interdisciplinary team of senior and junior researchers, resident in Vienna and abroad, will cooperate to tackle this challenge.

Preliminary works

The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) is currently funding preliminary work on the project within the framework of a so-called “Initiation and Enhancement of Bilateral Cooperation” program. The funding encompasses various steps reaching form a first research stay in India to two conferences in Berlin and New Delhi in order to fine-tune and elaborate the discussion.
The first meeting will take place in Berlin in September 2011. This will be the occasion to conceive of a comparative survey of the topic within European and Indian Medieval Studies. The main fields of historical research will be examined such as politics, economy, religion and ethnicity. The speakers are requested to give an overview of these topics from our specific perspective. At the same time they will try to hint at open questions and discussions worth to be compared more intensely. Each topic will be covered by two scholars, of Indian and European history respectively, as to highlight the comparative aspects. **On the basis of these lectures, methodological, terminological and thematic problems of the comparative approach will be discussed.** Renowned scholars will participate in the meeting, the program of which will be attached in the Appendix of the present proposal. **The results of this discussion are supposed to be published as a special issue of “The Medieval History Journal” in 2013.** The second meeting in New Delhi will continue the discussion and transfer the emphasis from the general surveys of broad topics to more special topics presented and compared again from two speakers.

**Comparative surplus of the two preliminary meetings**

The twin lectures given by two specialists on Europe and India respectively on the same key topics are intended to set the framework for the meeting’s comparative surplus. In order to avoid parallel but unconnected lectures, various measures will be deployed. First, each speaker will be requested to comment on his counterpart’s lecture, the draft of which he will receive in advance, emphasizing the similarities and differences in methodology and content. This form of procedure will cast light not only on the research topic, but on the particular (and divergent?) approaches and traditions of European and Indian historical research as well. Subsequently, the general discussion will be opened for all participants and guests. The comparability of the lectures will additionally be strengthened by a question list compiled and distributed in advance by the applicant and his cooperation partner. Such a question framework will guarantee that each paper is focused on the project’s main perspective.

The question list’s main points will be, among others: What is the topic’s relevance in regard to the perception, deployment, and handling of diversity? How were these phenomena interpreted in historical science, both in the past and in the present? What kind of terminology and semantics have been applied, are there specific master-narratives and leitmotifs in the respective research field? Ultimately, the contributors are invited to devise the most controversial themes and questions within their key research fields. Question catalog and further auxiliary means enhancing the comparative character of the meeting will be clarified during the research stay in Delhi in April 2011.

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The DFG funded work is taken a starting basis for the further work. The main focus of the project is twofold: In a series of conferences at the University of Vienna and at universities in Delhi and other Indian cities, our Indian-European network of medieval research is strengthened and the ongoing comparative discussion is deeply entrenched. The second focus is the elaboration of one monographic study undertaken by the Post Doc staff member who is supposed to function as communication and coordination epicentre of the whole venture at the same time.

Series of conferences

A network of historians working on diverse fields of pre-modern European and Indian history is currently taking shape. The September meeting, organized by the Principal Applicant and financed by DFG, is going to unite them for the first time. This network comprises scholars of India and Europe, of the Middle Ages and Early Modernity; scholars residing in Europe, India and the US. The main trait of this cooperation is its virtually global feature. It is going to serve as a discussion forum that will determine the proceeding of the project considerably. All questions of further research focus and topic selection will be discussed by this group. Yet, the Principal Applicant and his main Partner are already in the very act of conceiving and devising high-potential topics for conferences to be hold in the years to come. Within the project’s three-year time frame one conference is due to be hold. In the first and last year in Vienna, in the second year at a venue in India still to be chosen. According to our plans, all these meetings will be attended be ten to twenty scholars hailing from India, Europe and the US. We are going to bestow great care to involve scholars working at University in Vienna and Austria to an adequate extent. People already engaged with the project in 2011 will surely play an important role in its further unfolding. Principal Applicant and his main Partner are proposing the following topics for the conferences:

First Conference: Diversity in Legal Sources

European medieval society inherited laws and legal customs from the Roman Empire and from Barbarian societies. During the Middle Ages, some significant legal advances were made which eventually shaped the foundation of modern European legal systems. The same variety of law sources and mingling of different legal traditions were significant for written laws promulgated on the Indian subcontinent. Diversity in terms of political, social, economical and religious status is a crucial feature in all forms of legal texts. Furthermore, the explanation and legitimization of differences and inequality within human society is one central scope of law making. That’s why certain medieval law texts lay great stress on elaborating social hierarchy and determining legal codes for each
social status group. In Western Europe, the dealing with difference changed considerably in the course of the Middle Ages. The authors of Penitential books for instance, composed mainly between the 7th and the 10th centuries, had a very clear notion of the importance of social ranking. In these books, priests dealt with the most frequently confessed sins and wrote down set penances for those sins. Although the penitential books take some account of the sinner’s state of mind, the penance for each sin was determined mainly by the list of sins ("tariffs," as they are called) and the social status of the sinner. It was not an impersonal system, but it was based on differences and distinctions of many kinds. In India too, the norms of particular social groups determined law in practice. Like in Europe, statutes and customs were therefore highly decentralized and quite specific in nature towards distinct groups.

Certainly, the assessment of social rank adopted new and more subtle forms over the course of time. Yet by dint of law making, human society was categorized, not only in early medieval Europe. Each group, distinguished by social, religious or economical criteria, was subjected to respective law customs or codes. These bodies of rules and regulations were sometimes created by group members like the canonists who composed and commented on the ecclesiastical law in Western Europe. In other cases, rulers or jurists imposed legal restrictions on groups they were not a part of. Peasants within the manorial system or Jewish communities in European towns were examples of such groups, which were defined and controlled by people not pertaining to them.

In all these circumstances, the existence and the character of social groups were determined by legal texts. These texts didn’t reproduce reality but “invented”, defined and froze the essence of social groups and distinguished them from others. So diversity was highlighted and served as means to conceive and categorize society as a complex organism.

However, written and un-written law was never an isolated and stable entity of its own but rooted in historical reality. That is why political social factors influenced the course of law or the direction of legal change. One case in point is the hybrid Hindu and Islamic legal system fashioned under the Maratha kings as a response to the pervasive presence of Muslims in Northern Indian territories. At the same time, law itself changed social norms in various ways. These dynamic factors of social change and interaction, either reflected or caused by legal acts, made jurists and lawmakers turn their attention to the problem of diversity and the ways the postulated differences between social and religious communities could be overcome and balanced. In legal texts, diversity as a factor of human society was therefore constructed and de-constructed at the same time. A close comparative look at this source genre in Europe and India will offer a great opportunity to better understand the dynamic relationship between social change and legal perception, between historical reality and its imagination in normative texts.

Second Conference: Talking about Difference – Diversity as Intellectual Construction
In the 1980s, Indian historians developed the approach and paradigm of “Subaltern Studies,” thereby formulating a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia. The concept became so successful that it was globally received and discussed. Literally, it refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether due to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion. Prominent members of Subaltern Studies did not only shift their focus from the elites to non-elites – subalterns – as agents of political and social change. What is more, they have a particular interest both in the discourses and rhetoric of emerging political and social movements and “Provincializing Europe”, viz. viewing Europe and the West not as the global key region and initial point of all processes of modernization, but instead as one unique region among many other unique regions in the world.

In the attempt to disclose and understand the peasants’ political thinking and acting, Ranajit Guha and other members of the Subaltern Studies Group drew their attention to discourses of kinship, caste, religion, and ethnicity through which peasants and other non-elites groups expressed themselves in protest. One consequence of this was the abolition of the boundary between elitist political consciousness and pre-political attitudes of non-elite groups. In the wake of these studies, the constructive character of all forms of knowledge came to the fore, too. In spoken and written language, in theoretical treatises and in vernacular literature, the notions of social order and subordination, of authority and hierarchy and of difference and diversity are always perceived and enunciated in the “language of power”. This language helps to order and understand the contingent reality and itself succumbs to constant change according historical change. From this point of view, the sources of the past, which we use to unravel the importance and categories of diversity in this past, don’t mirror the past reality but mirrors rather their creator’s perception and imagination.

A conference on diversity as an intellectual category in medieval Europe and India is going to use a theoretical background conceived by Indian scholars and cross-cultural comparative and global studies. This last-mentioned approach plays a crucial role at the University of Vienna and its Department of Economic and Social History. Many members of this Department are currently striving to establish the Department as the centre and hub of Global Studies at the University. In addition, the discussion of Subaltern Studies concepts at Vienna is also some sort of renewal, since Ranajit Guha worked at the Department some years ago and is still resident in Vienna. To some extent, our conference will take Indian scholars back to the beginning to this once Indian reformation of historiographical concepts.

The source basis for such a rapprochement to diversity is manifold and doesn’t exclude a single genre of written or non-written source material. In variance to other ways of scrutinizing the effects of diversity in the past, this approach lays stress on the awareness that language “constitutes” reality, a position contrary to intuition and to most of the Western tradition of philosophy, promulgated by the “Linguistic turn” of the 1990s. In their view, everything we think of as “reality” is really a convention of naming and characterizing. One linguistic and artistic scheme of categorization, order and regulation is the labelling of diversity. The emergence,
transmission and reshaping of images and topoi is related to diversity within human society. Examples for this process can be found both in visual arts and written sources. Among those, one can start to look at legal, theological and historiographical texts, without excluding other genres though. The fine-tuning of the endeavour has to be done during the conference’s concrete preparation. Owing to the above-mentioned connections to Subaltern Studies, which still enjoy great popularity in India, the venture will surely arouse interest among Indian scholars of cross-disciplinary affiliation.

Third Conference: Topic due to fixation within the working progress.

Two Diploma Students, their responsibilities and their benefits

The two Diploma Students are going to take part in the yearly conferences. They will care for the smooth proceeding of the events and be at the disposal for the internationally composed team in the phases between the meetings. Their responsibilities also cover the support of the participants’ research projects by the search for literature, copying, proof reading and other auxiliary tasks. By this means, they are going to be introduced to a promising field of comparative research. The conference series will offer them an opportunity to get familiar with renowned scholars from different background and a host of currently highly-discussed key questions of Medieval and Early Modern historical research. On this basis they are going to write their Diploma thesis which may be supervised by the Principal Applicant and one further participant of the project. Provided the cooperation is evolving fruitful for both sides, the two Diploma students are invited to continue their work in cross-cultural medieval research.

Requirements for this position are as follows: Some expertise in both Indian and European pre-modern history. High degree of academic promise as future scholars documented by above-average study results. Analytical and linguistic capacities to tackle a cross-cultural comparative topic. Social competency and team spirit.

Post Doc Position

The main part of WWTF funding is intended to allow the engagement of a three-year Post Doc Position. The incumbent of this position will assume varying tasks within the project. Firstly, she/he stands at the centre of the whole venture, encouraging and activating all forms of communication between the group members and involved scholars. Distinguished by previous research experience in the field of Indian and European comparative history, she/he enhances the ongoing communication within the group and the conferences by his or her own written and oral contributions. As a Post Doc she/he has to have credentials making her/him an coequal dialogue partner to all members of the group. So the organization of the conferences and the
communications with invited scholars will belong to the responsibilities of the position. Hence she/he has to have above-average skills in research management. This task entails advanced social skills and experience in organizing and guiding academic team work.

Secondly, she/he carries out exemplary comparative research on the topic of pre-modern Indian-European comparative history. Necessary qualifications for this are research expertise in both regions and a high degree of academic promise as scholar documented by an above-average dissertation and further publications. The selection of the monograph’s topic depends largely upon the successful candidate’s qualifications. According to the Principal Applicant’s focus on the economic and social history of the Middle Ages, a candidate interested in these fields is most welcome. With regards to current trends in global history, the comparative look at economic and social phenomena is an appropriate and cutting-edge approach to cross-cultural history.

One possible topic the Principal Applicant would be ready and able to support is the comparison of great reversals in economic history, which happened in medieval Europe and India respectively, bringing about wide-ranging and enduring impact on the two economic systems. The cases in point could be the turnaround of Mediterranean trade in the Late Middle Ages and the economic changes triggered by the establishment of the Mughal regime in 16th century India. For Europe, the phenomenon has been scrutinized quite well: Meanwhile up to the 12th century, luxurious commodities stemming from the Levant and from Islamic countries in North Africa and the Near East were highly sought after in Western Europe, but in the 15th century the situation had changed dramatically. The main commodity export encompassing both high-end and mass commodities led not any longer from the East to the West but conversely from proto-industrialized regions in Western Europe to consumers from Islamic courts and cities. This reversal of trade channels had considerable impact on the flow of currency between Europe and the Near East and furthermore changed the structure of trade and production within Europe. Such a reversal of trade channels and international entanglement of trade and industry occurred in India in the 16th century with the emergence of the Mughal Empire. On the one hand, the overwhelming power and the conspicuous grandeur of the Mughal emperors, their residencies, courts and noble retinue soon extended their influence through the whole subcontinent and beyond. Even without being able to conquer all of India, the presence of this paramount centre of power and lavish culture turned around the structure of medieval Indian economy. Political boundaries were by no means insurmountable obstacles for the trade of commodities and the demand of the Mughal court increased production, and not only in territories conquered by Babur and his successors. This reversal of trade and production patterns was not limited to the Indian subcontinent either. Instead, the connections to Iran and the Persianate societies in Afghanistan and Central Asia grew stronger in this period, making the Mughal court a renowned centre of Persian language and culture.

Both reversals deformed the pre-existing economic system, turned trade and productions channels around and set the stage for a new equilibrium in a cross-cultural context. Both
Europe and India were changed considerably by this respective shift of political and economic power. Old boundaries in terms of politics and economics were abolished, new ones were created. Both processes were of such great complexity that one scholar is unable to cover them comprehensively. But there are single facets worth studying and comparing. One question would be how diversity and barriers in the fields of trade and production were negotiated and surmounted. Another approach could focus on one special commodity, textiles for instance, and examine the changing patterns in this sector. According to the interests and qualifications of the successful candidate for the Post Doc position, the final topic of the study will be determined.

2.1 Key challenges, state of the art and relevant references

There is no state of the art in our research area. There a myriads of studies both on Medieval Europe and Medieval India. In recent decades, the European discovery of East and South Asia from the 13th century onward has absorbed a lot of academic attention. Looking at these travel treatises, scholars at Western universities were normally interested in the changing experience and world perceptions of medieval European monks, diplomats and merchants. Since they spent most of their time abroad within the Mongolian Empire and at the Great Khan’s court in East Asia, modern scholars’ eyes were directed to the space in Central and East Asia which were parts of the Mongolian Empire. Like Marco Polo, who touched India only shortly at his way home, Western historians usually don’t care much about South Asia.

Cross-cultural comparative work on Medieval India and Europe is, therefore, scarcely established at European universities. Much more effort has been made at comparing Europe and China. One well-known example is the “International Consortium for Research in the Humanities” at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg. In this Consortium, medievalists and sinologists together work on the topic "Fate, Freedom and Prognostication. Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe". Having worked for some time at the University of Erlangen, the principal applicant is familiar with the Consortium and its staff. That will facilitate co-operation, precious and worthwhile especially on the level of methodology. Our project is entering virgin soil. This doesn’t mean there are no previous works and examples regarding both our methods and the content of our venture. The points of reference we are going to use don’t deal with Indian-European comparison but they do deal with cross-cultural encounter and comparison on a conceptual level or within selected regions in Europe, Africa or Asia.

The key challenges are due to the lacking of previous comparative work on Medieval India and Europe. The initial and most relevant obstacles are the selection of the right topics and the right partners in Austria, India and other countries. Sounding measures regarding both items are taken during the preliminary phase of the project in 2011. Two work-shops in Berlin and New
Delhi bring together senior and junior scholars. Their discussions are going to serve as to fine-tune the topics worth being compared and treated more in detail.

**Selected bibliography:**

Asher, Catherine B./Talbot, Cynthia, India before Europe, Cambridge 2006.


Borgolte, Michael (ed.), Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen im europäischen Mittelalter (Europa im Mittelalter 18), Berlin 2011.


Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, Mughals and Franks (Explorations in Connected History), New Delhi 2005.

**2.2 Objectives of the project, problem choice and research question(s)**

The similarities between Europe and India are obvious, but did the historical development in both regions follow the same path towards similar results? There are several essential questions, which have to be posed in order to tackle the issue: Was the perception, the tackling, and the result of cultural contact realized in the same way? Was handling diversity in India similar to handling diversity in Europe? Moreover, what do we learn about the two world regions by comparing the specific forms of handling diversity? Are there European or Indian patterns of dealing with heterogeneity?

In European historical science, often the view has been advocated that Europe grew not monolithic, but at least more homogeneous and uniform during the Middle Ages. In particular the initially great economic and cultural variances downsized owing to the growing mobility of men, commodities and ideas. On the other hand, there are many scholars claiming that the specific Western European system of myriad competitive regional powers, always wary of each other and fearing to fall behind, was the origin of the innovative potential, which enabled the European expansion at the threshold of the modern era. This view has sometimes been expanded upon, namely by the theory that the wide-ranging experience of cross-cultural
encounters made by medieval Europeans provided them with unique expertise and skills confronting foreign peoples and cultures successfully. According to these theories, by dint of specific European skills in handling diversity, the rise of Europe has been explained away.

For both European and Indian scholars it will be of special interest to compare India’s pre-modern history and its academic interpretation with this specific time-honoured discourse. Consensus about the problems of essentializing Europe or India as monolithic and coherent spaces will easily be reached. The modes, perceptions and results of different levels of encounter in Europe and India are arguable, though. Such a comparative attempt analysing pre-modern European and Indian history from one very specific point of view has not yet been undertaken.

2.3 Methodological approaches

The main features of the project’s methodology are comparative and cross-cultural research. Both approaches are well established in historical sciences, albeit not without risks and critique. Deployed in a controlled and cautious way, these methods are still essential to historical science. As long as the interest in processes of integration, modernization and globalization retain their paramount importance in academic and lay discussion about human societies, these research tools are indispensable.

Comparative research aims to make comparisons across different countries and cultures. The major challenge in comparative research is that the data sets in different countries may not use the same categories, or define categories differently. We are aware of this problem and are tackling it in the current preliminary phase of the project. The methodological discussion will surely go on. Comparative research is a time-honoured feature of historical research whose popularity rose constantly after World War II. In the last two decades, historical comparison evolved into an essential tool for the study of Medieval Europe. One reason for this success was the fact that perceptions of Western Medieval Europe as a space determined by cross-cultural encounter and exchange gained a foothold. Obviously, comparison is one appropriate method to look at heterogeneous societies and their interaction with other civilizations.

Globalization has further increased the intellectual curiosity about other cultures and the anxiety to compare oneself to the others. That is why in recent years cross-cultural comparative studies have augmented in number and topics. Works based on this approach form an essential part of constantly expanding global history. Research on Medieval European history has been influenced considerably by this paradigm, too. While relations and comparison between single European regions dominated in older comparative research, nowadays relations and comparison between European and Non-European regions have come to the fore. Europe’s
relations to its neighbours on the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and in the Near East were the logical and first objects of such cross-cultural comparative studies. In the meantime, several books have been published on Europe’s relations and comparison with Islamic countries in Africa and West Asia.

Much less effort has been made at comparing Medieval Europe with South and East Asian civilizations. The insignificant contact between these regions in the Middle Ages explains this lack of interest. Yet, the comparison of geographically and culturally very diverse regions offers different but certainly not less insight. If the paragon is selected and executed carefully, such a work brings home divergent and comparable patterns of development. The comparison of Medieval India and Europe lives up to these expectations because both India and Europe are considered to combine heterogeneity and unity. The respective modes of handling diversity will therefore deepen our understanding of similarities and discrepancies between these two regions in a crucial epoch of transition to Early Modernity.

Comparative research normally does not tend to investigate “grand theories” or civilizations as a whole. It instead concerns itself with middle-range theories and questions that do not strive to describe a social system in its entirety. That’s the case in our approach, too. The focus on the question of how diversity was perceived and negotiated offers a springboard to overcome the great divergence and distance between India and Europe and to disclose comparable phenomena. This concentration on one concrete question will not prevent us from embedding our case studies into a broader context.

2.4 Project Design / Work plan

I am going to assume the professorship of economic and social history at the University of Vienna in October 2011. For the time being I am working at the Free University of Berlin where I have prepared the above-mentioned cooperation with Indian colleagues. At a workshop in Berlin in September this cooperation is going to assume a clearly outlined form. Hence the organization of the project is in a preparative state up to now. Yet, the working process involving a group of a dozen scholars from Europe, India and the US has already begun. The results of this work in progress are certainly going to concretize and enrich the project submitted to WWTF. At the end of 2011, when the WWTF is hopefully about to start, our joint expertise has surely made some headway. As a matter of course, all proceedings and alterations in concept and schedule are going to be discussed with WWTF.

*The Conference Series*

2012: Conference: Diversity in Legal Sources
2013: Conference: Talking about Difference – Diversity as Intellectual Construction
2014: Conference: Topic still to be determined

Post Doc position

Involved in the organisation and realization of the three conferences. Alongside, she/he composes a monographic study as outlined above in point 2.

2.5 Relevance and prospective benefits

In times of globalization, the interconnections and comparisons between Europe and especially Asia are attracting more and more attention, both from academic scholars and from society in general. This trend is evident in historical research as well. The establishment of research groups and clusters at German universities for instance clearly shows this shift of interest. The Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows" at Heidelberg University is just the most prominent example among many others. Obviously, China is the prevalent and most common case in point. This has primarily economical reasons. Besides, the admiration of the culturally outstanding Chinese Empire and its 2000-year tradition has been attracting scholars from the West since the Age of Enlightenment.

There are good reasons for the assessment that, within the next decades, India is going to catch up with China and even outstrip it in many ways. Undoubtedly, India’s economic and demographic development is going to accelerate this changing pan-Asian power balance. One result of this alteration will also be increasing research interest in India and its past by Western scholars and institutions. It goes without saying that South Asia is already well present in European humanities’ research. Still, the world’s largest democracy is surely gaining more attention and interest while its global political role is incessantly growing.

Vienna and its University are already a prominent centre of research on South Asia. The University’s Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies is home of renowned scholars, most of whom are working on modern or ancient India. Our chronological focus on the period of the eve of colonialism adds one more facet of South Asia research to these existing core areas. Contacts with the Institute and its head Prof. Dr. Karin C. Preisendanz have already been established. During the WWTF funding there will be a close cooperation with the Institute and its members.

The WWTF project “Handling Diversity. Medieval Europe and India in Comparison (13th-16th Centuries CE)” helps creating a strong research focus on South Asia at the University of Vienna. The city’s global interconnectedness, evident not least by several international
organizations with headquarters in Vienna, is going to be illustrated and backed by these efforts. The emerging global power India will play a pivotal role in 21st century politics and global economy. On the one hand, this will pose a challenge to Europe, Austria and Vienna, on the other hand, this will offer new opportunities as well. The most appropriate qualification for a successful relationship with India is mutual contact, understanding and exchange. Our project will deliver one building block for this process.